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ABSTRACT

The Know-Nothing party of the 1850s was the first nativist party in American politics to gain importance and serves as an exemplar of how cultural nativism may be captured and turned toward political goals. The resurgence of nativist sentiment in the Know-Nothing era provides an excellent example of a rhetorical situation which seriously constrains the form of the accompanying rhetoric. To overcome the failings of nativist rhetoric, the Know-Nothings linked nativism to common American values in such a manner that audiences were convinced that nativism was consistent with American tradition. The Know-Nothing party created their conspiracy theory along traditional lines and by appealing to three basic concepts that were strong in the American mind at that time: secrecy, patriotism, and Protestantism. The use of these three basic American values enabled the party to construct a drama consistent with the values of the natives, thus easily incorporating it into the traditional American mythology. The failure of the Know-Nothing party was that it did not adjust its story to respond to the demands of the changing rhetorical situation, which include the party's refusal to acknowledge a strong competing counter-explanation of the country's problems and the party's ignorance of a dramatic change that had taken place in the American audience, that is the division of a country on the brink of civil war. (Fifty-three notes are included.) (MS)

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THE RHETORIC OF THE KNOW-NOTHING PARTY: NATIVISM AS A RESPONSE TO THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Nativism has long been a strong cultural force in American life. It has provided the impetus for several short-lived political movements. This paper analyzes the rhetoric of the first national political party to successfully use nativism in its platform, the Know-Nothing party of the 1850's. The analysis of the nativist rhetoric of the party reveals that the source of both its success and failure lies in the traditional values party members used to overcome the constraints traditionally imposed upon the nativist response to the rhetorical situation.

The Rhetoric of the Know-Nothing Party: Nativism as a Response to the Rhetorical Situation

> As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics."
>
> --Abraham Lincoln, 1855[1]

The notion that the United States is the land of freedom and opportunity has attracted millions of immigrants who desired to share in the "American Dream." There is a darker side to this dream, for some American citizens have feared and resented immigrants, because newcomers compete for employment and bring foreign cultural elements to threaten American traditions. These citizens periodically have banded together in social movements to keep "America for Americans." Such nativism spans most of American history, from the Colonists' protests against the import of British prisoners to a modern American's fear of Asian refugees.

The first major American party to succeed in exploiting these nativist tendencies was the Know-Nothing party of the 1850's. In the years from 1850-1855, this party was the fastest growing in the United States, outstripping even the Republicans.[2] While it existed, the party had a significant impact on the political structure of the United States, for it was a leading

force in the political realignment of the 1850's.[3] Historian David Potter claims that the Know-Nothings were eventually responsible for enabling the Republicans to elect Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency in 1860.[4] As the first nativist party to gain such importance the Know-Nothing party serves as an exemplar of how cultural nativism may be captured and turned toward political goals.[5]

Nativism is usually defined as the expression of antiforeignism and anti-Catholicism.[6] These two sentiments are linked often enough to be viewed as characteristic expressions of the temper of American society.[7] Although nativist sentiment appears to be at odds with the traditional values of the "melting pot," nativist issues occasionally become so important as to have a significant impact on American political life. These issues recur at regular intervals in almost precisely the same form. Historian John Higham has noted that with the exception of racial arguments, "the kind of accusations which nativists leveled against foreign elements remained relatively constant. Anti-radical and anti-Catholic complaints in the twentieth century sounded much like those bruited in the eighteenth."[8] Yet, sometimes such accusations appear ridiculous, while at other times they are taken seriously. What made the difference in 1850?

Rhetoricians, by and large, neglect Know-Nothing rhetoric. Only two rhetorical studies exist. Both of these are written

from a "classical" frame of reference, and their bias in favor of "rationality" led these scholars to dismiss the power of nativist rhetoric. Donald W. Zacharias, for example, attributes Know-Nothing success to circumstances of the times, rather than to the party's handling of those circumstances.[9]

The resurgance of nativist sentiment in the Know-Nothing era provides an excellent example of a rhetorical situation which seriously constrains the form of the accompanying rhetoric. As Lloyd Bitzer notes in his landmark study, the "rhetorical situation" is a complex mixture of "persons,events, objects, and relations" that instigates rhetoric.[10] Wherever there exists an imperfection in the world that can be ameliorated through discourse, the situation calls for a response. This response, to be successful, must be "fitting" for both the problem and the audience.[11] The audience is especially constraining on the proper form of the rhetoric. As Kathleen Jamieson notes, audiences come to expect certain forms of rhetoric as responses to certain kinds of situations. If these forms are violated, the audience will not be satisfied by the response.[12] By 1850, nativism was a well-developed outgrowth of the traditional American fear of conspiracy, and, as such, was already part of a set rhetorical drama from which the rhetor dare not stray. This drama, however, had not previously been successful in winning the assent of enough Americans to make nativism a vital political force. The Know-Nothings adapted this antecedent form by creating a rhetoric

that appealed strongly to a number of common American values that lay outside the nativist drama. They linked nativism to those values in such a manner that audiences were convinced that nativism was consistent with American tradition. As a result, the party temporarily overcame the failings of nativist rhetoric. Know-Nothing rhetors succeeded masterfully at adapting the traditional situational constraints of nativism to the audience's perception of present day political needs. The tactic was nearly successful in making the Know-Nothings a permanent political force in the United States.

To provide a context for the analysis, I will first summarize the background of the Know-Nothing party and the rhetorical situation it faced. Then, I will analyze the rhetoric to reveal both its success and its failure as it cast its audience in a role consistent with the nativist drama. Conclusions will then be drawn concerning the reasons why nativism was doomed to failure.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

During the 1830's and 1840's, several nativist political groups attempted to gain power in local elections, but these rarely posed a threat to the established national parties. The Know-Nothing party was the first nativist organization to enjoy national political success. Originally formed in 1849 in New

York by Charles B. Allen and other New York City nativists, the Know-Nothing organization was formed as a secret brotherhood, complete with signals, rituals, and sacred oaths. The organization had three goals: to prevent non-native born citizens from holding public office, to proscribe native Catholics from the same rights due to their allegiance to the Pope, and to uphold and defend the Union without regard to sectional issues, such as slavery.[13] The society evaluated candidates for public office, and recommended that members band together to vote for those candidates selected as "most American." As the organization expanded, it gained the appellation of "Know-Nothing," because its members were sworn to profess ignorance of the group's workings. In 1855, the group threw off its veil of secrecy to become an open political party, renaming itself the "American Party" to better express its nativist role. At this point, the party already had an estimated membership of a million and a quarter.[14]

The rise of the party was phenomenal in both the local and national arenas. Know-Nothing candidates swept various state elections,[15] and in 1855 had elected nine governors and held the balance of power in Congress.[16] When Know-Nothing leaders failed to curtail immigration, party members rapidly lost faith in the ability of the party to solve their problems through immigration legislation, and turned to other parties. By 1860 most of the party's membership had defected to the main line parties.

The Know-Nothings rose to power during a period of political, economic, and cultural upheaval. Their interpretation of political events was cast in the form of a great conspiracy theory, and their interpretation was formed at a time in American history when a conspiracy theory was likely to be powerful.[17]

What Richard Hofstadter calls "paranoid" interpretations of events are "mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action."[18] David Brion Davis theorizes that these social conflicts can couple with influxes of immigrants, giving rise to native paranoia.[19] When Americans are secure in their own social standing, immigrants and their alien ways are seen as harmless. If immigration rises while Americans face internal social conflicts, the clash of traditions can become a "crisis of definition." Natives and immigrants battle over what it means to be "American." Whose traditions are binding? Whose morality will shape the future? Nativist rhetoric, then, is a response to the fear that American ideals are too weak to withstand outside pressure. Nativists believe that aliens will infiltrate and subvert American culture.[20] From nativist fear to nativist social movement is then a small step. Leland Griffin notes that nearly all social movements begin with the belief that the social order is somehow "contaminated." Members of the threatened society rise up and band together to repel the pollution. When this response

becomes more or less organized, a social movement is born.[21] If immigrants are viewed as a source of the contamination, then nativism blends with the urge to reform, creating a powerful combination.

The conditions set forth by Hofstadter, Davis, and Griffin were in great evidence during the Know-Nothing rise to power. Native-born citizens faced threats to the political, economic, and cultural fabric of their lives. For example, the two-party political system was in grave peril. The slavery issue had succeeded in dividing Whigs and Democrats until both parties seemed on the verge of collapse. Since the Compromise of 1850, Northern and Southern politicians had been arrayed against each other, regardless of party line. The growing political unrest robbed both sections of their faith that the present political parties could hold the country together. This factor made voters more willing to consider a third-party contender, especially one the would not bow to sectional pressure.

Natives also felt threatened economically. From 1850 to 1854, the American economy fluctuated wildly between boom and depression. The largest rise of inflation, caused in 1854 by the California gold rush, happened to coincide with the highest point of immigration to that date -- over 400,000 annually.[22] These new immigrants competed with natives for already scarce jobs. Economic competition sparked ill-feeling quickly. Those natives residing in cities faced the roughest competition. Even in the

South, with its reliance on slave labor, immigration caused economic peril. In the 1850's, immigrants in the South competed with slave labor, and sought legislation to keep blacks from certain jobs, such as dock work. One Southern Know-Nothing, L.W. Spratt of South Carolina, echoed the common fear that immigrants would "question the right of masters to employ their slaves in any works that they may wish for; . . . and thus the town of Charleston, at the very heart of slavery, may become a fortress of democratic power against it."[23] Natives were witness to a veritable erosion of the economic security once promised by the vast resources of the United States. It was not unreasonable for them to link this erosion with the rise of immigrant labor that was occurring coincidentally. Riots against foreigners in Philadelphia (1844) and Saint Louis (1852) were symptoms of the ill-will between some natives and naturalized Americans. This mutual dislike prepared a fertile field for the seeds of Know-Nothingism.

Culturally, natives and immigrants were divided by a number of issues, including religion, social reform, free schools and temperance. Temperance was especially inflammatory. Both Irish and German immigrants came from cultures where drinking was an accepted form of social intercourse. Many natives, however wanted to limit drinking as a method of curing the "drunken Irishman." Temperance reform also served as a status issue, for it was the native attempt at regulating the one obvious

difference between themselves and immigrants.[24] The immigrants responded with justifiable anger.

The combination of political, economic, and cultural strife served to loosen the native sense of security. The fact that in each case it was possible to somehow find immigrants involved only fanned native fears. The situation was ripe, according to the conditions set forth by Hofstadter, for a new conspiracy theory, and the Know-Nothings provided one.

THE RHETORIC OF THE KNOW-NOTHING PARTY

The Appeal of the Rhetoric

The Know-Nothing party created their conspiracy theory along traditional lines. An evil force was threatening to subvert the values of the United States, its agents had been detected, and brave heroes were needed to crush the threat. The nativist version cast Catholics and immigrants as the villains and American voters as the heroes. The Know-Nothings were masterful at turning this basic plotline into a compelling drama. They did so by appealing to three basic concepts that were strong in the American mind at that time: secrecy, patriotism and Protestantism. The first created a heroic role for the audience, while the latter two represented values these heroes were called upon to defend. These elements will be discussed in turn.

Secrecy was used by the party in the early stages of its development, especially during its drive for a strong core membership. Kenneth Burke has noted that "mystery" is a powerful force in any society. It serves to create hierarchies and maintain distinctions between social classes.[25] The United States was supposedly a classless society, where any person could rise as high as another. Yet, Americans still sought ways of maintaining some form of personal distinction.[26] Joining a secret society was a way to set oneself apart from the crowd. This was the era of Masonic temples and Knights Templar, when secret meetings were considered a tradition of American fraternal orders. A secret order made membership a privilege, and the secrecy created bonds that made it difficult for members to depart.

Whatever the reason actually was for beginning the party in secret, Know-Nothings explained it as a reflection of American Tradition. They glorified their mystery, almost as though secrecy itself was a basic human right:

> Who will say that the people -- the sole depositories of political power -- discontented with existing parties, may not, even in this mysterious manner, make new combinations for the transaction of their own affairs, and erect new standards of policy for themselves? Is it not their right? Who says no! . . . Is it secrecy that makes them wrong? Sir, secrecy is their right. It belongs to them. No man and no power can justly take it from them.[27]

Secrecy was thus touted in such a manner as to identify the party as the defender of the rights of Americans. Since the

Anti-American groups ploted in secrecy, it was only reasonable that secrecy become a tool of the defenders. Secrecy additionally served to separate the Know-Nothings from established parties because Know-Nothings used secrecy to restore the rights of the people, while other parties used secrecy to "steal" rights: "How has the machinery of the old parties been worked for many years past? Openly and publically? No. The People before the curtain knew as little about what was going on behind it, as the inhabitants of another world."[28] Members of the Know-Nothing party shared their secrecy among themselves. It was a gift of the party.

The secrecy of the party also allowed it to create a mysterious hero, an anonymous titan who eventually becomes known as "Sam." Sam is not "Uncle Sam," but rather a chimeric figure, sometimes young, sometimes old, always heroic:

> That noble and mysterious personage Sam, with sound head and pure heart -- coming up from the fires of the Revolution, shaking his hoary locks of wisdom, and cleaving to the doctrine of our fathers -- is seated upon his war horse and with sword in hand, is flying over the plains of this new world, bearing down all opposition with a purpose as firm as the eternal granite that supports the earth, "that Americans shall rule America."[29]

Joining the order became "going to see Sam," and new members could partake of the spirit he personified. Members shared his god-like qualities, and joined him in the relentless pursuit of America's foes: "He never strikes without warning, but when he does, the edge of his claymore severs joints and marrow, and a

hecatomb falls at every blow."[30] The Order of Know-Nothings thus cast its members as mighty heroes, ones set apart from ordinary mortals who did not share the secret. These heroes were ready to defend the "American way." The next task for the party was to reveal what the American way was, and who were its enemies.

The Know-Nothings gave the newly created heroes a goal by appealing to two clusters of values in the American mythos: patriotism and Protestantism. These two are the foundations of what Winthrop Hudson terms the two "American religions," one of the church, one of the republic.[31] These values defined what it meant to be an American. They kept the country victorious in the face of all threats. Within these major appeals could be encompassed all the lesser values that may have appealed only to certain sections of the country, such as temperance or popular government.

Patriotism was a vital force in Jacksonian America.[32] It summarized powerful identifications with the republic, because the republic represented values that natives revered: democracy, individualism, freedom, a high standard of living, equality, and progress.[33] The Know-Nothings used patriotism as a powerful appeal to members. This allowed natives to accept the Know-Nothing drama as an extension of their own patriotism. The party extolled democracy, freedom, and human dignity, all in the name of patriotism, in an attempt to achieve perfect identification. The party's rhetoric was merely an extension of

that of the founding fathers' doctrines of republicanism, doctrines Know-Nothings felt "Americans should revere and adopt as their own. . . as the chart, indeed, by which to advance among mankind the noble doctrines of the civil and religious rights of man."[34] As far as Know-Nothings were concerned, the blood of the Revolutionary soldiers called out for action against the foreign threat:

> America for Americans, we say. And why not? Didn't they plant it, and battle for it through bloody revolution. . . . Why shouldn't they shape and rule the destinies of their own land . . . the land red and rich with the blood and ashes, and hallowed by the memories of their fathers? Why not rule their own, particularly when the alien betrays the trust that should never have been given him, and the liberties of the land are thereby imperilled?[35]

The patriotic battle cry united the hearers, no matter what part of the country they hailed from, as patriotic Americans capable of overcoming sectional differences to meet a common foe.

The party used patriotism both to glorify American and excoriate the Catholic Church. They began with a powerful recreation of the early American republic, a social order that existed only in the Know-Nothing vision. The vision was built upon the American myth that America was a new Eden, "a fresh place, a new beginning, an opportunity."[36] America's excellence was grounded in the spirit of the American people, rather than in any physical accomplishments. The Know-Nothings set that spirit above all else, and credited it with creating a country "peerless in strength and beauty, the pride and excellence of the whole

earth; . . . invigorated and intensified by the untrammelled play of those infinite powers which God has given to man, and which are as comprehensive as the universe of matter and thought in which he exists."[37] Naturally, the power of this noble spirit infused the newly formed nation with such strength and nobility that it soon created "a nation of the century, and yet mightier than the oldest empire on earth."[38] Americans were God's new chosen people, endowed with strengths and abilities far beyond those of any previous "breed" of human.

The Know-Nothings completely internalized these myths of greatness, and remained true to the republican tradition as they viewed it. American ideals had created a tremendous possibility for a perfect social order, what patriotic soul could deny this?

The Republic was drawn as an ideal to be defended at all costs. And it needed defending, claimed the party, because there was an anti-republican force at work in the form of the Catholic Church. Know-Nothings viewed Catholicism as the natural foe to the republic's democratic institutions, a foe that would stop at nothing to get its way:

> Examine the history of the Roman Catholic Church throughout all time. Her course has ever been a consistent one. . . . Like the fabled upas tree it is her office to destroy every healthy organization which exists within the sphere of her pestiferous influences. She is a serpent that gives no alarm -- a moral plague-spot in a political miasma. In a word, she is that whitened sepulchre which, though fair without, is inwardly full of dead men's bones and corruption. Hell must rejoice and demons exult in so accursed an institution. So long as it shall flourish, Satan will need no emmissaries.[39]

Through its secret agents, Catholic immigrants, the Catholic hierarchy began to infiltrate the country with "alien" notions such as sectarian Bibles, liberality of strong drink, and the end of democratic government. There could be no doubt that all Catholics were a threat to the future of the republic. Thomas Whitney, a Know-Nothing leader, summed up the Know-Nothing position that Catholics were, by definition, unpatriotic:

> No man will say that an individual can be a subject of two distinct, and opposite sovereigns at the same time . . . the predominant attachments, and sense of duty in the individual, must lean toward one or the other. . . . Therefore, in the issue before us, if a papist realizes within himself a sense of duty to the papal sovereign over his duty to the sovereignty of the United States, he will throw his influence, heart, soul, and body upon the side of the papacy, and against the United States. . . . I do not hesitate to aver, that no papist ever took or can take an oath of allegiance to the government of the United States, in its letter and spirit, and hence, no papist can become a citizen of the United States by the process of naturalization.[40]

Clearly, then, the influx of Catholic immigrants represented a threat to good patriots everywhere, a threat that could be overcome by joining the superpatriotic Know-Nothings.

Patriotism combined with another value cluster, Protestantism, to create religious reasons for joining the party -- reasons which were as compelling to the audience as the secular ones. First, the party identified Protestant values, making them synonymous with the secular values of republicanism, popular government, intelligence, free speech, suffrage, and

freedom.[41] "Liberty, sir," cried a Know-Nothing Congressman from New York, "dwells here, under the protection of the stars and stripes of a Protestant flag, in the warm embrace of a Protestant faith."[42] Natives, who were Protestant, knew that their religion upheld the country as surely as any political party. And the Know-Nothings were a radically Protestant party. Such complete identification with a religion as was shared by Know-Nothings and other natives guaranteed that members would find the party's value system compatible with their own.

Protestantism carried within it the seeds of anti-Catholicism. Most of the original colonies were founded by Puritains, Huguenots or Presbyterians whose religions had been under Catholic attack at one time or another.[43] Americans were used to suspecting the Catholic Church of harboring subversion, although they infrequently acted upon these unspoken assumptions.[44] Know-Nothings played upon these old suspicions. They identified Catholics as agents who served a despotic Pope who wanted nothing less than the total destruction of Protestantism. The Church was presented as "anti-American in everything that relates to the freedom and the purpose of American institutions and of American society."[45]

These evil agents had to be stopped. The heroes created by the party had only to act by voting the Know-Nothing ticket. Once in control, the party would toughen naturalization laws and prevent Catholics from holding public office. This would render

the agents powerless to corrupt the government, and thus stop the Catholic plot. Party members claimed that this solution would stop the Catholic Church's political aims without compromising the Catholics' religious freedom. It would sacrifice the political rights of a few "benighted" immigrants to preserve the rights of the mass of native Americans. Never did the party directly admit that they were practicing religious proscription, rather they claimed a motive of loving concern for the immigrants, who simply did not know enough to protect themselves from despotism. Frederick Anspach summed his party's attitude succinctly when he claimed that "It is because we love [the immigrants] and the interests of our country that we would give them no higher political position than citizenship, and that only after they are duly prepared. As such, they can be happy and useful."[46]

For the loyal Protestant, the choice was clear: "Either the principles handed down to us by our fathers, or those of Jesuitism will prevail. . . . [Jesuitism] which, instead of sending our children to the school, may send them to the inquisition."[47]

The use of these three basic American values enabled the party to construct a drama consistent with the values of the natives, thus easily incorporating it into the traditional American mythos. But, during the early 1850's the rhetoric was more than merely believable, it was compelling to a vast number

of voters. What made the rhetoric compelling was that its appeal to the most basic of American values made it serve as a symbolic device that carried its audience to another time and place: their mythic past. The party's initial use of secrecy, and its emphasis on patriotism and Protestantism, republic, and liberty, moved the drama to an ideal past where there was no foreign threat, no North-South strife, and no political hacks. There were only loyal Americans, united in the name of the United States. The party offered total unity, identification and the chance for concerted action against a common foe. What native, faced with a fragmented future, could turn down an indivisible past? In the Know-Nothing framework, Americanism became a state of being, rather than a state of becoming. The party's fidelity to these "ancient" values turned the story back upon itself. The success of the Know-Nothings would lead Americans back to what they once were. The party would establish order by setting the country back upon the past, and thus enable the new leaders to retrace the path of American progress without the interference of immigrants and Catholics. The story would repeat itself, this time without error. Then, the path toward a glorious future would be assured, free from the snares set by Catholic enemies.

The Failure of the Rhetoric

The Know-Nothing party appealed powerfully to its members

during the years 1850-1853. Yet, the drama did not retain its converts long enough to establish the party as a permanent political entity. This analysis reveals an important rhetorical failing which contributed to the party's demise. Simply put, the party did not adjust its story to respond to the demands of the changing rhetorical situation. This fault is most apparent in two areas. The party first refused to acknowledge a strong competing counter-explanation of the country's problems. It did not adjust its position even after new enemies revealed to the audience that its dramatic appeals violated the same values it claimed to be defending. Second, the party also ignored a dramatic change that had taken place in the American audience. Know-Nothings continued to stress universal values long after sectionalism and the slavery issue had fragmented these values beyond repair.

At the beginning, the Know-Nothing drama garnered members through "intellectual" belief in its simple storyline. But there came a time when the movement's initial victories did not make conditions better. As a result, voters began to listen to competing stories. For, by 1856, there was an important competing drama being used by the Republican party. This story accepted the Know-Nothing diagnosis that a mysterious force sought to corrupt the republic. The Republicans, however, embodied that force as the "slave power." The "slave power" conspiracy theme was, like nativism, one which had existed in

American culture since the country's founding, and had been used by abolitionists in support of their position. Now, however, the Republicans incorporated the theme into their official party rhetoric, placing it in direct competition with the Know-Nothing drama. The "slave power" drama cast a different enemy -- Southern politicians and planters -- in the villainous role. Slavery was described as a more pervasive evil than Catholicism, which was merely a form of spiritual slavery. Southern slavery had a concrete, obvious symptom -- the physical enslavement of blacks by white Southerners. And slavery was a universal evil, for people of all religions and races recognized its corrupting effects. The "slave power" conspiracy theory acknowledged Catholicism as a form of slavery, but not one requiring immediate action like black slavery.[48] This new competition between stories threatened the Know-Nothing hegenomy.[49] Soon, voters were provided with reasons to abandon the old drama for the new. Those reasons were provided by Whigs, Democrats, and Republicans. Their attacks revealed the inconsistency in the Know-Nothing story. The attackers pointed out that Know-Nothingism required natives to crush free speech, free religion, and individual worth in order to achieve that party's goals. This contradiction was mentioned frequently by party detractors as they sought to weaken party membership. The logical extension of the duality was presented on the Senate floor, when the audience was reminded to "bear in mind that if to-day we are called upon to persecute the

Catholics for opinion's sake, we may tomorrow be called upon for the same reason to persecute the Baptists or the Presbyterians."[50] Whether the members of the movement were moved soley by this tension is unclear. Only ex-members claimed to have seen the duality, while those who remained in the party did not mention the matter.

Through all the attacks, the Know-Nothing rhetors maintained a story true to the original drama. That original drama, however, was no longer viable once the party's enemies revealed the basic flaw in its structure. This flaw made it impossible for the person of conscience to remain a Know-Nothing. The Know-Nothing plan of action cast the audience in a self-conflicting role. It made joining the party an affirmation of values, but made carrying through that affirmation an act that would destroy the same values it celebrated.

The Know-Nothing appeal to patriotism and Protestantism was completely acceptable to the native audience. Republicanism, freedom, progress, and human rights were dealt with in an obvious, straightforward manner. In addition, the United States had a long and happy tradition of using the franchise to defend these values, so that voting for a party that represented Americanism was natural. If one accepted the Know-Nothing diagnosis that political and cultural corruption could be halted by reaffirming traditional values, then accepting these values could only have the happiest of consequences.

As soon as any genuine action was required, however, the party's platform failed. Know-Nothings extolled the virtue of free religion, free speech, suffrage for the common people, liberty of conscience, and the worthiness of individuals to improve their own lot. These were values celebrated by natives. The sacrifice of Catholics and immigrants required natives to crush their religion, rob them of suffrage, snuff out their liberty, and deny them any claim to individual worth.

Members of the party thus became concurrently the rescuers and destroyers of the freedoms they valued. The thoughtful natives could not justify destroying the rights of all Catholic Americans to preserve their own, nor could they help but see a blow against aliens as a stifling of the rights they sought to guarantee. At the same time, they could not deny that something had to be done to preserve those values so dear to Americans.

That "something to be done" was soon provided by the Republican party in the North. The eventual success of the Republicans illustrates the second flaw in the Know-Nothing rhetoric, its failure to discern that the American audience was changing. By 1855, the United States was no longer a single country; it was rapidly becoming two separate entities, one northern, one southern.[51] The Know-Nothings maintained until the end their vision of a united republic that was immune to sectional issues. They continued to stress that Know-Nothingism "broke down the imaginary line of Mason and Dixon, and

reestablished political inter-communication between the North and the South," long after political reality gave lie to that claim.[52] Eventually, the party's failure to recognize that their single "American" audience was no more led to splintering of the party. One group changed its name from "Sam" to "Jonathon" and formed an anti-slavery and anti-Catholic party that admitted Protestant foreigners to the ranks. Eventually, the Republicans captured many of these splinter groups and defeated the Know-Nothings. There was no longer room for an "American Party" in the sharply divided republic of 1855.

CONCLUSIONS

The Know-Nothings provide an example of a political party that strove brilliantly to overcome the constraints of its rhetorical situation. In an era of rising dissension in the United States, the party created a rhetoric appealing to a cluster of basic values that the nation still found compelling, no matter whether the hearer was from North or South. For a time, it molded the perceptions of a large number of Americans by providing a precise cause and simple solution for all the social ills of the 1850's. The values selected by the party imply an audience that embodies these values, reveres them, and seeks to practice its principles. Thus, by accepting the Know-Nothing role, Americans of the period became heroes, defenders of

Americanism in every sense of the word. No other major American party of the era reveals so well the necessity of molding an audience's perception of itself before asking it to take political action.

A second insight arises, however, not from the party's brief success, but from its failure. The Know-Nothings are an excellent example of a group whose rhetoric failed to cast its audience in a "fitting" role for meeting the rhetorical situation.

Know-Nothing rhetoric cast the audience as united Americans who could save the union by reinforcing traditional American values at the ballot box. As has been discussed, this vision of the audience had two weaknesses, one which was intrinsic to the nativist message and one which was extrinsic. The intrinsic flaw arose from the contradiction between noble values and ignoble actions which violated the audience's newly created self-concept. Asking an actor to perform acts which are out of character can be fatal to any drama, no matter how carefully constructed. Overall, the nativist drama made so many contradictory requirements of its actors that eventually even the most desperate of audiences could no longer accept it. These contradictions appear to remain to varying extents in other groups employing nativist elements.[53] The second problem arose because the party did not adapt its vision of the audience to fit political reality. It was impossible for the audience to

maintain the role of united Americans when the country was on the brink of civil war. This flaw was the party's alone, and is not inherent in nativism.

The rise and fall of the Know-Nothings lends hope to those who fear that similar "paranoid" political parties might someday garner enough power to rule in the United States. Americans have seen the rise of many prejudiced political movements, and have also, with no small amount of relief, seen them fall. But, the sentiments persist, and may rise again. At the moment, it appears that no American political party seeking to destroy the rights of others can avoid the value conflict that destroyed the Know-Nothings. If a party rises in the name of Americanism, it must win members by extolling the virtues that are most central to our national identity. Identification must be built on the only store of common values that will appeal to a wide variety of voters: freedom, democracy, and religious liberty. And there is, so far, no way to redefine these values to condone the destruction of the same rights for others. The story such a group tells may work for awhile, but eventually people will discover the contradictions in the plot, and begin to seek new rhetorical diagnoses that have no such complications.

It would appear that the best antidote for nativist rhetoric is one that extolls traditional American virtues in such a way as to prevent its replacement by values that a new group of "Know-Nothings" might better be able to bend to its purposes.

Americans seem able to judge moral issues based on common values. Reinforcing those values may ensure that they remain as competent in the future as they were in 1856.

ENDNOTES

[1]Abraham Lincoln, letter to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855. Quoted by David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 253.

[2]Michael Holt, "The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties," in History of United States Political Parties, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973), I: 575-620, contains a description of the rivalry between various parties at that time.

[3]Michael Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know-Nothingism," The Journal of American History, 9 (1973): 309.

[4]Potter 259. See also Charles G. Hamilton, Lincoln and the Know-Nothing Movement (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1954), who suggests that Lincoln himself was not above accepting Know-Nothing support.

[5]Many historians have attempted to explain the rise and fall of the Know-Nothings. Although they acknowledge the impact of political, cultural, and economic factors upon the movement, all tend to ignore the rhetoric produced by the party, except to quote examples of specious arguments or blatant prejudice. These studies thus attribute Know-Nothing success to either the corruption of established political parties or the real ethnic differences existing between natives and immigrants. Two of the more interesting historical works are Jean Baker, Ambivalent Americans (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) and Ray Billington, The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860 (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1938). The first work is an investigation of politics, the second of prejudice.

[6]W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Glouchester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968) 2.

[7]Billington 193. Holt reminds us that the Federalist, Anti-Mason, National Republican, and Whig parties of the nineteenth century all expressed nativist sentiments. See "The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties," above.

[8]John Higham, "Another Look at Nativism," The Catholic Historical Review, 44 (1958): 150.

[9]Donald W. Zacharias, "The Know-Nothing Party and the Oratory of Nativism" in Oratory in the Old South, ed. Waldo W. Braden and John J. Auer (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970) 218-33. See also Hace Tishler, "The Public Speaking

of Four Representative Know-Nothings," Master's Thesis, University of Virginia, 1955.

[10]Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968): 6.

[11]Bitzer 10.

[12]Kathleen Jamieson, "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 6 (1973): 162-71.

[13]Billington 380-81.

[14]George Kramer, "A History of the Know-Nothing Movement," Diss. University of Southern California, 1936, 32. Opponents continued to refer to party members as "Know-Nothings."

[15]For Example, Peyton Hurt notes that in California, Know-Nothings elected every one of their candidates for office in 1855, including the governor. The Rise and Fall of the Know Nothings in California (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1930).

[16]The actual Congressional figures were: Senate: 42 Democrat, 15 Republican, 5 Know-Nothing; House: 83 Democrat, 106 Republican, 43 Know-Nothing, and 70 of the listed Republicans had been or were members of Know-Nothing Lodges. From Charles G. Hamilton, Lincoln and the Know-Nothing Movement (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1954) 6.

[17]Conspiracy theory as a rhetorical element has been explored in our discipline. See John F. Cragan, "Rhetorical Strategy: A Dramatistic Interpretation and Application," The Central States Speech Communication Journal 26 (1975): 4-11; and Craig A. Smith, "The Hofstadter Hypothesis Revisited: The Nature of Evidence in Politically 'Paranoid' Discourse," Southern Speech Communication Journal 42 (1977): 274-89.

[18]Richard Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) 39.

[19]David Brion Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 28-29.

[20]Davis, 28-29.

[21]For Griffin's theory of social movements, see "A Dramatistic Theory of the Rhetoric of Movements" in Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, ed. William Ruekert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 456-78.

[22]Allan Nevins, A House Dividing: 1852-1857, volume two of Ordeal of the Union (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947) 273.

[23]Quoted by William Barney, The Road to Secession (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972) 37.

[24]Joseph R. Gusfield, Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1966) 4.

[25]Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 115.

[26]For a discussion of the impulse Michael Kammen calls "collective individualism" see his People of Paradox (new York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

[27]Nathan P. Banks, Congressman from Massachusetts in Congressional Globe, 33rd Congress, Second Session (1854), Appendix 50.

[28]John Hancock Lee, The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970) 200-01. A discussion of the role of secrecy in the party may be found in "Principles and Objects of the American Party" (New York: np, 1855).

[29]Anonymous, quoted in Overdyke 181.

[30]Letter in the Richmond Penny Post Feb. 17, 1855. Cited in Overdyke, p. 181.

[31]Winthrop Hudson, Religion in America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965) 112.

[32]Robin Williams names patriotism one of the major value orientations in the United States. See American Society (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) 456.

[33]See Williams, Chapter 11, for a discussion of values clustering around American institutions.

[34]Jacob Broom, An Address Delivered at Castle Garden, February 22, 1854 (New York: Bro. William B. Weiss, 1854) 16.

[35]"America for Americans," in The Wide Awake Gift: A Know-Nothing Token, ed. by "one of 'em" (New York: J.C. Derby, 1855), 40.

[36]James Oliver Robertson, American Myth, American Reality (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 29. A rhetorical discussion of this theme may be found in Carl Wayne Hensley, "Rhetorical Vision and the Persuasion of a Historical Movement: The Disciples of Christ in Nineteenth Century American Culture," The Quarterly Journal of Speech 61 (1975): 250-264.

[37]Frederick Saunders, A Voice to America (New York: Edward Walker, 1855) 25.

[38]"America for Americans" 40.

[39]To Those Born on the Soil Who Know Nothing (Brooklyn, N.Y.: n.p., 1854) 3.

[40]Saunders 228.

[41]See Thomas Whitney, A Defense of the American Policy as Opposed to the Encroachment of Foreign Influence (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1856) 94-103 for a contrast between Protestant and Catholic values as seen by a Know-Nothing.

[42]Thomas Whitney, Congressman from New York, in Congressional Globe, 34th Congress, First Session (1856), Appendix 969.

[43]See Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) 11, for a description of the colonists' fears.

[44]State laws had been passed as early as 1750 prohibiting Catholics from holding political office. See Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1967), 248.

[45]"Franklin", Know Nothingism; or the American Party (Boston: E.W. Hinks and Company, 1855), 7.

[46]Frederick Rinehart Anspach, The Sons of the Sires (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Co., 1855) 117.

[47]Anspach 53.

[48]See Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style.

[49]For a description of the reform groups that battled for the American middle-class' support, see David Brion Davis, ed, Ante-Bellum Reform (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

[50]Augustus C. Dodge, Iowa Senator, in Congressional Globe,

33rd Congress, 1st Session (1854), part 3, 1778.

[51]For an excellent brief history of the events leading to the Civil War, see Potter.

[52]Whitney, Defense 287.

[53]An excellent collection of contemporary newspaper articles on nativism can be found in Melinda Maidens, ed., Immigration: New Americans, Old Questions (New York: Facts on File, 1981). At the present time, Lyndon LaRouche is again running for President. He has claimed among other things, that the Pope has secret control over all three television networks. His campaign illustrates nativisn taken to its most ridiculous extreme.